

THE BEACH BOYS
SURFIN' ON THE TIDAL WAVE OF
HISTORY

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PART ONE

Class Consciousness in the Beach Boys

The Beach Boys. Images of a forgotten (that is, repressed) past of pressed levis, polished chinos, cashmere sweaters, crewcut wax, gym dances, daring attempts to get beer. What the hell, are they still around? Yes, the Beatles have come and gone, and the Beach Boys still exist, having just released about their twenty-fifth album. Having received the official approval of the aesthetician-businessmen who run Rolling Stone (a quantitative advance over Plato's philosopher kings), the Beach Boys are now the dividing line between hip and not. Is that right?

The Beach Boys created the surfing sound, put Southern Cal on the collective roadmaps of our souls, and turned our adolescent minds to the self-elevation (in fact, the resurrection and rising) of the American mass plastic wonderland of the West. Southern Cal was an adolescent epiphany of what America could become, rising out of itself: the ultimate drive-in world. Drive in, man, drive in. So that first single, "Surfin' Safari/409," was the crystalization of the world we had learned about from the Mouseketeers, now grown up out of itself.

And surfing: Annette Funicello now doing beach party movies, our culture was growing up with us, and now it was, after all, reality catching up with art. Back in '57 when our minds were being molded by the Disney company every afternoon from 5 to 6, there, right in the middle, the prettiest one was Annette Funicello, right? Dark-haired, not blonde, and subliminally the message was there: with a name like that she must be Italian, right? And that means she's Catholic. Against his conscious intentions, Walt Disney had introduced Italians to Suburbia all across the country. Or is it Suburbia to Italians? But it was no big thing, right? Right there, before dinner every night, safe suburban wombs were being subtly undermined by the introduction of Mediterranean Catholics, our own version of the integration movement.

And there (ah ha!) was the introduction of cultural class consciousness to an entire generation of America's future leaders. Of course, no one ever caught on, but that's how subtle it all was. That first single by the Beach Boys set up the whole thing. "Surfin' Safari" was the great upward mobility myth: a surf board cost; it really was a class thing. The leisure class, the upper middle class, the true essence of Suburbamerica--that, we were all being told in proper

media functioning, is what you poor little twerps are aiming for. ("TV dinner by the pool, aren't you glad you stayed in school?"--Frank Zappa.)

And on the other side, "409," the first real white rock song about cars, the other part of our culture, and the one with a different class origin: working class, blue collar. If Daddy can't buy you a car, then rebuilding your own and street draggin' is one way to give the system the finger. And in the middle of the drama between leisure class teens and proletarian teens we hung, wanting that super culture of weekend ease that we could grow into: power lawn mowers and good schools for our kids and garden clubs. And on the other side: car culture, greasers, without any materialist promise, but somehow seeming more earthy, more real.

What was the choice? Shetland wool sweaters or grease-spotted sweaty T-shirts with a pack of Camels or Luckies rolled in the arm. Maybe it finally came down to a choice between Johnny Mathis and Elvis Presley. But we never had to make the choice. The Beach Boys stated the class consciousness situation without resolving it, and before that hanging dilemma had to be settled, it was coopted, taken over, super-

ceded by the counterculture. There was a middle way, and from lyric and protest, Dylan moved to ambiguity and nonresolution with Bringing It All Back Home, Highway 61 Revisited, and Blonde on Blonde.

But somewhere in there the Beach Boys disappeared from our view. Why? One year before Sgt. Pepper, the Beach Boys, who had been an influence on the early Beatles, came out with "Good Vibrations," an advance pop rock simply hadn't faced yet. And then, in the fall of '66, they had taped an album that would have coopted the Beatles. Why wasn't it released whole? At this point, the conspiratorial view of history claims that it was smothered because Sgt. Pepper was in the works, and the Beatles were supposed to be the ones who got to start the new mode. So from that unreleased album came the Beach Boys' Smiley Smile with three cuts from the master.

Slowly then, the transformation to a celebration of the ambiguity, and suddenly the decision was between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. American youth opted for Britain. What happened to our tradition? Lost or dormant? The Beach Boys were on tour with the Maharishi. Far out! Or was it hype? Well, as it turns out, it was both. There was, someone discovered, a new way

of life out there. And from the Turner thesis, the New Frontier became a pioneer village commune, and here was American youth in buckskins and choppers instead of horses (but it was the same thing, wasn't it?) and cooking organically on a wooden stove. But the Turner thesis had also gone abroad, and you could now play air cavalry, though the Indians had changed color to yellow, or be a weekend warrior and shoot it up in the ghetto or at Kent State.

When the Beach Boys had sung that suburban anthem, "Be True To Your School," what was it, after all, but be true to your country? Love it or leave it! But the class thing intervenes again, for school loyalty was different, after all. In the suburbs it meant football and pompom squad loyalty: be true to your school. But for urban working class teens, it meant defending your turf, in the neighborhood, on the beach, at the McDonald's after the basketball game.

So the logic of "Little Deuce Coup" had a certain undercurrent counteracting "California Girls" and the surfing phenomenon went the way of Jan & Dean (suave impersonators) and the nitty gritty undercurrent of our music transferred over from Elvis and the Everly Brothers to Dylan and the

Stones and the Airplane, with, at the same time, the Beach Boys holding both ends of the ambiguity in mainstream continuation of Buddy Holly. "Fun Fun" promised fun "until Daddy takes her T-bird away," and then fun anyway after that worst of adolescent punishments, being grounded. (Worst after the enormous affliction of American youth, big red pimples, a punishment delivered on them because their ancestors cut down the forests and destroyed the balance of nature, the ecological variant of Montezuma's revenge.)

So fun isn't finally tied to material possessions, an undermining of the American ethos to the point of being subversive, and worsely subversive than the black blues/rhythm and blues/soul/etc., which, after all, isn't the real music of whitebread and mayonnaise American stationwagon transported youth. All this ends up in the movie Two Lane Blacktop where it's all very clearly laid out between Warren Oates' '70 GTO, the ultimate suburban car (factory installed stereo tape deck) and James Taylor's '55 Chevy, a car of working class expertise, phallic exhaust system and all, but there it is.

Surf's Up is a culmination of their last decade, and the re-expression and develop-

mental expression of their work. The album begins with a gentle "Don't Go Near the Water," with the basic rhythm coordination of the Beach Boys chorally counterpointing like mad, with wangy quadraphonic goodies, and standard simplistic Beach Boys lyrics, this time with one more complex couplet being slewed in by joystick:

Toothpase and soap will make our oceans
a bubble bath
So let's avoid an ecological aftermath.

"Don't Go Near the Water" is paired with "Long Promised Road," hitting both ballad and the heaviness of protest chorus in a very effective variant, supplemented by dizzying organ work. Message--simple:

So hard to plant the seed of reform
So set my sights on defeating the storm.

And the task: "Throw off all the shackles
that are binding me down."

But the final message still comes down to a limit of one: do it yourself, repeated on the splendidly absurd "Take a Load Off Your Feet," which advises:

Better take care of your life
'Cause nobody else will.

So, not having moved to collective struggle as an understanding of the dilemma, though explicating that dilemma, a panacea is still offered: retreat to the past with "Disney Girls (1957)" and the lure of a soft jamestayloreltonjohn type ballady thing with such a pleasant diffuse diversion as:

Reality, it's not for me
And it makes me laugh.
Fantasy world and Disney girls
I'm coming back.

The past melts into football Saturday afternoons and you can grow up and marry Annette, fulfilling all those pre-pubescent fantasies about her breasts under a soft white sweater.

I'm in love with a girl I found
She's really swell
Because she likes
Church, bingo chances, and old time dances.

.
It'd be a peaceful life
With a forever wife.

The dream-fantasy cum nostalgia turns to sirens and hard driving rock with new lyrics to "Riot in Cell Block #9" now called "Student Demonstration Time":

The violence spread down South
where Jackson State brothers
Learned not to say nasty things
about Southern policemen's mothers.

And the conclusion: "Next time there's a riot, well, you best stay out of sight." The reversals come fast. It's a put-on, calling for an end to student demos, but then the irony is clear: it's a police riot. Stay away? Who is the warning for? Suburbia dissolves into reality. You can't go home again.

But where do you go? "Feel Flows" suggests a Gestalt escape into mush and the meaningless union of nonself definition. "Feel goes. Feel flows." Indeed. But there is a reality counterposed again. "Looking at Tomorrow (A Welfare Song)" promises that it's not so hard to drop out 'cause you can bounce and you can get taken care of. There is rent to pay; even for post-scarcity youth. And then the combination of mysticism and nonsense, severe and playful self-ironic "A Day in the Life of a Tree," which takes us back to Lamartine and Wordsworth. Romanticism? Good Jesus--you mean that we're going back to Romanticism?

Followed up by "Til I Die":

I'm a cork on the ocean
Floating over the raging sea.

A new American mantra? A new American Romanticism? What the hell? The trees of Thoreau followed by the cosmic eyeballing of Emerson?

And so the album ends, with "Surf's Up." The fullblown challenge of our new Romanticism now flowers, blowing up like a time-lapse movie of a bud, or the slow expansion of a napalm fireball on the evening news. The message is innocence, to be a child again, to be child-sighted, even going to the Wordsworthian extreme: "The child is the father of the man."

Was this the meaning of the counterculture?
Was this the phase that launched a thousand ammunition ships?

The music hall is a costly bow
The music all is lost for now.

And yes, there it is, the dream of John Kennedy coming back, like Napoleon Bonaparte to the Second Empire. And who will save us now?

Surf's up
Aboard a tidal wave.

The ambiguous message of the Beach Boys remains just that. The world is moving, reality intrudes on trees and dreams of high school suburbia. You can't find peace in the woods because of the power saws, and if the child is father of the man, what does that say about dreams of a nuclear family with a sufficiently sexy wife who knows her loves can extend no further than church, bingo, and dances? Riding a surf board on a tidal wave? Far out, but you gotta be some spaced-out dude to carry that off for very long, or for much longer than a decade. When the wave hits, then what? But maybe we'll know what to do by then. So hang ten and keep on playing the music. And what will our innocence do then?

So, we don't have it together, nor do the Beach Boys, but they're still stating the dilemma, which is something our generation needs.

PART TWO

The Social Construction of Reality

The feelings you get from going to school, being in love, winning and losing in sports--these are my inspirations. A sociologist might say I am trying to generate a feeling of social superiority. I live with my piano and I love to make records that my friends like to hear.

--Brian Wilson (early '60s)

(Brian Wilson's) other trouble was that, like all talented and intelligent pop writers, he found himself stuck in an entirely phony position. Understandably, writers want to grow up and progress. But their crucial audience, the people who finally buy their records, are maybe 16 years old and by no means hooked on experiment. Pop is always teen music. People in their 20s may be interested, may think it smart to namedrop, but basically, they aren't consumers. They don't spend. So you have a stalemate: The writers aren't allowed to go forward, don't want to stand still, can't go back. They're wedged from all sides. Their big failing is only that they're too intelligent. If they were robots, things would be forever simple.

--Nik Cohn, AWOPBOPALOOBOP-
ALOPBAMBOOM: Pop from the
Beginning

The Beach Boys, these Beach Boys, are our Doomsday Machines, our Gibraltar monkeys, our talisman against mortality. If any thing happens to them, we've had it. America sucked into the ocean! Far out!

--Neal Gaber

The first American frontier ended at the Pacific Ocean with the construction of California. With JFK's New Frontier, California became the base of two frontiers. One was psychological, the gestalt-mush of Eselen (where Charles Manson spent the weekend before sending his programmed Family off to kill Sharon Tate). In that womb mentality, the psychological pioneers never seemed to notice that California was also the industrial base of the Southeast Asian frontier, complete with air cavalry and genocide.

Somewhere in the middle and interim, the Beach Boys have come to embody the contradictions of California. No longer does Brian Wilson write of school, sports, and sticky love, though he does still write of love. Brian and the other Beach Boys have grown up, which isn't all that easy, especially when you're rich. And while they have left the pop market behind, and stopped giving free rent to Charlie Manson, they

haven't (any more than the rest of their tortured generation) resolved very much. But they have done about as well as anyone at depicting the dilemma, and, after all, what else can one expect from an industrial-consumer-and-mass art?

Pet Sounds, now re-released with Carl and the Passions--So Tough, has been thought by the Beach Boys to be their best album. It is soft, mostly love songs, lush, with strings, overdubbing, and orchestration. Yet still irrepressibly ironic: doing that Weavers/Kingston Trio favorite, "Sloop John B," as a kind of spectacular out-sacharining of the tradition, and elevating it to a new quantum level, with absolute abandon: "This is the worst trip I've ever been on." The Beach Boys had dropped.

Rock music differs from most of the mass media in that it has less censorship and permits more dissent, mostly as a critique of the old social order. In this it is ambiguous, and easy to attack as elitist, sexist, or whatever. Yet that fault should not obscure the fact that it is an attempt to transcend the dominant ethic. The Beach Boys are the epitome of the thrust of the challenging force: to transcend what is, through a radical innocence. Yet, being the apogee, they also begin to push at the limiting border and

to become something else. Thus, on Pet Sounds: "I Guess I Just Wasn't Made For These Times."

Released at the start of the counterculture, Pet Sounds, more than anything else at the time (in retrospect), caught the dilemma of that giddy, if abortive, effort.

I know so many people
Who think they can do it alone
They isolate their heads
And stay in their safety zone

. . . .
They come on like they're peaceful
But inside they're up tight
They trip through the day
And waste their thoughts at night

Now how can I come up and tell them
And tell them that the way they live
could be better?
I know there's an answer
I know, but I had to find it by myself.

Everyone was hung up individually, and yet transcending the ego trip had no effective form, no real communal or collective way out, despite the counterculture's self-hype that it did. The problem had its contradiction in that only individually could one see that collectivity was the solution, as

the Beach Boys sing on Carl and the Passions --So Tough: "You Need a Mess of Help to Stand Alone."

The fact that one's own alienation tends to make one tolerant of the forms of alienation of others meant that the counterculture could understand, endlessly understand, that someone was "getting his (or her) head together," but could provide only toleration, at base, not a real alternative culture to move into. In the anomie produced by an internal and psychic migration, the counterculture was an attempt to overcome the social uncertainties of middle class and middle class aspirant youth. It never faced the reality of how the inherently transient nature of an age group defined "culture" could be fixed. In fact, it was not a social group, but a generation, a mood. At base, it was a market--something that businessmen never lost sight of. Given its self-limit, the counterculture was unknowingly imprisoned. The Beach Boys in Pet Sounds were the finest songbirds in the cage, and "Caroline No" was the finest lyric understanding of social entropy as an objective and subjective condition. Not prescription, but description--understanding, if not action.

Beyond the edge, past the burning heart, at the end of excess, comes calm and wisdom,

and "Cuddle Up" on Carl and the Passions is one of the most remarkable achievements of blending simple statement and musical restraint in rock to date. How many people could not fall into cliché when using the elementary language of affection and love ("cuddle up") and end up making you respect your own words, your everyday words? Suffice it, they do it. And it doesn't resolve anything, but it makes you feel warm.

The musical evolution of the Beach Boys has never really shifted out of their primal mode: an uneasy alliance between the instruments and the emotionless cool of the voices. Carl and the Passions is a rest and recollection album after Surf's Up, for example with a rather remarkable hymn to Krishna, "He Come Down," done in a doctored-up gospel. The Beach Boys and gospel? Yes, and fitted into the old standby five-part harmony with a flsetto underlined by a heavy bass line and simple rhythm, followed by "Marcella," a very classic bit of Brian Wilson, done in quadraphonic.

But Brian, who has been going deaf for nearly a decade, has less of a major role, and his contributions are much more part of the ensemble. And newer sounds intrude on the new albums, even a little pedal steel. The result is a new intensity

in the lyricism, a clearer and cleaner orchestration, if sometimes still falling back into easy outs without Brian's hard genius.

This new lyricism has its fullest development on Holland, their latest album. (They call it an album and a half since you also get a little record which contains a musical fairy tale, a nice piece of charming fluff.) There is a fullness in their musical and poetic expression which demands several close listenings and which goes beyond warmth to satisfaction.

Again the lyrics make constant reference to water, giving some future graduate student of pop-culch a dissertation topic. "Steamboat" ("the steamboat of living") advises "Don't worry Mister Fulton/We'll get your steamboat rollin'" in a very smooth working of the plenitude of electronic instruments and resources they had in the studio, with matching vocal, music, and lyrics in cool mellow. Wisely avoiding a tour de force, "California Saga" is a three-part series, fairly done. The second part has an extended passage of Robinson Jeffers, mostly to drive home the "we are one with nature, ecology, etc." theme. It's still there, the life style elitism: "Big Sur my astrology it says that I am meant to be/Where the rugged mountain meets the water," . . .rather

gracefully ignoring the price of real estate in Big Sur, and managing not to connect life style consumption with the ecological situation.

The Beach Boys are part of that bunch of people who would take throw-away beer bottles away from the masses at the same time they "sing and share/Their new found liberty . . . And live in canyons covered with a springtime green," ignoring that only affluence gives them their freedom. So they sing of their friends who don't need electricity. Of course, those friends presumably can't buy Beach Boys records, not having electrically-operated stereos, and it's us poor dirty air and electricity consumers who are screwing up the environment and providing the Beach Boys with the money to visit friends who have escaped. But then contradictions have never been the Beach Boys' strong suit.

So you flip the record over and find them championing the displaced Native American. After all, they are so natural, so close to the earth, so primitive: Rousseau all over again. Wonder if they have natural rhythm; they sure can dance . . .hmm.

The album ends with three love songs, very different in mood, very close in message:

affirmation of relation. Good stuff. The Beach Boys have grown up, become more than moderately rich, and have had the freedom to sing what others wish. "A sociologist might say I am trying to generate a feeling of social superiority." His own? Our own? Superior to whom? Unanswered questions.

So the Beach Boys give up three concerts to do one benefit for the Berrigan brothers, play free at anti-war rallies, and roll around Big Sur. We're still there, with the surfboard and the little deuce coupe, both at once. "If they were robots, things would be forever simple." Yes, but none of us are, and things never are, even in Big Sur. But they are attractive minstrels with an alluring message: climb aboard, ride that surfboard, and ride that ultimate wave, the tidal wave. And when it crests, and when it engulfs the land, that will be our doomsday, and the music will be lost in the thundering surf.